



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Finding Support Through Self-Help Groups

*"My years as a medical practitioner, as well as my own first-hand experience, have taught me how important self-help groups are in assisting their members in dealing with problems, stress, hardship, and pain.... Today, the benefits of mutual aid are experienced by millions of people who turn to others with a similar problem to attempt to deal with their isolation, powerlessness, alienation, and the awful feeling that nobody understands."*

**-Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop**

The popularity of self-help groups has grown enormously over the last decade-and for good reason. Researchers and participants alike point to the benefits of self-help groups, and physicians, appreciating the value that self-help groups offer patients, are referring individuals to these venues for added "medicine." Today, millions of Americans turn to their peers for support, guidance, and empathy as they battle a host of conditions ranging from weight loss and codependency to alcoholism and bereavement.

A self-help group, also known as a mutual help group or a support group, generally has four characteristics:

- Mutual help is the primary goal of the environment.
- Members own and run the group themselves; while there may be a professional involved, he or she fills a supportive role and is not the "leader" of the group.
- Members share the same problem or experience.
- There is no or minimal cost for participating in the group.

The benefits of self-help groups are undeniable. Many studies point to the benefits of mutual support in helping members deal with the realities of having a serious illness, understanding an emotional trauma, resisting addiction, or pursuing healthier relationships. Consider these research findings:

- One half as many former psychiatric inpatients required re-hospitalization after participating in a support group for 10 months

- than did former psychiatric patients who did not take part in a support group.
- One year after being admitted into a substance abuse treatment agency, African American participants in a self-help program (Alcoholic Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous) reported significantly more improvements in their medical, alcohol, and drug problems than did African American patients who did not participate in self-help groups after treatment.
  - Individuals who participated in a peer-led weight-loss group lost an equal amount of weight as individuals who participated in a similar group led by a professional (but they spent only half the money!).
  - In a study of 57 African Americans who had been members of self-help groups for sickle-cell anemia, researchers found that the members who had been involved the longest reported fewest psychological problems associated with the disease, particularly in work and relationship areas.

Whatever the problem-whether it be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual-there is likely to be a self-help group in your area where individuals are coming together in a shared pursuit for greater health and peace. Check out the American Self-Help Clearinghouse's Self-Help Sourcebook Online at <http://mentalhelp.net/selfhelp/> for more information and details about how to find (or set up) a support group in your community. Take this step to lead you down the path to a healthier lifestyle.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the Web site at <http://www.4woman.gov>.*